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ABSTRACT

This research reports the personal characteristics of middle-level principals, their professional and academic preparation, the nature of their jobs, their future plans, and their recommendations for the development of future middle-level principals. Implications for current middle-level principals are noted as are recommendations for the recruitment, development, and continuous training of future principals of middle-level schools. Consistent with previous studies, middle-level schools were defined in the study as those serving young adolescents in any combination of grades 5 through 9. Principals of all middle-level schools in the United States were invited to participate in the online survey. More than 1,400 principals completed the questionnaire. Survey questions addressed four major areas relative to middle-level schools: (1) their context and environment; (2) the leaders and leadership structures; (3) curriculum; and (4) school improvement practices. The focus in this paper is on the leaders and leadership of middle-level schools. Results present characteristics of middle-level principals, their academic preparation, prior experiences and professional preparation, the challenges of their work, and their future plans. In addition, specific information is presented on how they spend their time and their perceptions of roadblocks to successful school reform. (Author)

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Recommendations and Implications Emerging from a National Study of Middle Level Leadership

by

Vicki N. Petzko

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Vicki Petzko is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. She can be reached at 423-425-4542 or vicki-petzko@utc.edu.

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Recommendations and Implications Emerging

from a

National Study of Middle Level Leadership

Abstract

This research reports the personal characteristics of middle level principals, their professional and academic preparation, the nature of their jobs, their future plans, and their recommendations for the development of future middle level principals. Implications for current middle level principals are noted as are recommendations for the recruitment, development, and continuous training of future principals of middle level schools.

The research design was constructed as the third of three "decade studies" which focused on middle level schools and were sponsored by NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals). Previous studies were in 1980 and 1992. Trend data are addressed.

Consistent with previous NASSP studies, middle level schools were defined in the 2000 study as those serving young adolescents in any combination of grades five through nine. Principals of all middle level schools in the United States were invited to participate in the on-line survey. Over 1,400 principals completed the questionnaire. Survey questions addressed four major areas relative to middle level schools: their context and environment, the leaders and leadership structures, curriculum, and school improvement practices. The focus of this paper is on the leaders and leadership of middle level schools.

Results present characteristics of middle level principals, their academic preparation, prior experiences and professional preparation, the challenges of their work, and their future plans. In addition, specific information is presented as to how they spend their time and their perceptions of roadblocks to successful school reform.

Recommendations are made with reference to recruitment of future principals, expanding their knowledge base regarding the specific developmental needs of early adolescents, and their training as transformational leaders. Recommendations are made for university based principal preparation programs. Additional recommendations are made regarding the appropriate role of the assistant principal, special needs of the "new" principal, and professional development.

Special thanks to my colleagues
on the
National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools
(NSLMLS)
Research team

Jerry W. Valentine, Professor of School Leadership and Director of the Middle Level Leadership Center at the University of Missouri.

Donald C. Clark, Professor Emeritus of Educational Leadership at the University of Arizona.

Donald G. Hackmann, Associate Professor of Educational Administration at Iowa State University.

Stephen E. Lucas, Assistant Professor of Educational Administration at the University of Illinois.

John R. Nori, Associate Director of School Improvement for NASSP.

Recommendations and Implications Emerging from a National Study of Middle Level Leadership

The purpose of this paper is to report data collected in the most recent National Association of Secondary School Principals' National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002). Specifically, it focuses on the principals in those schools, their personal characteristics, educational background, professional and academic preparation for the principalship, the nature of their jobs, their future plans, and their recommendations for the development of future middle level principals. The paper concludes with implications for current middle level principals and as well as recommendations for the recruitment, development, and continuous training of the next generation of principals of middle level schools.

This study was the third in a series of "decade studies" conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe & Melton, 1993; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, Keefe, 1981)[i]. Consistent with the previous studies, middle level schools were defined as those serving young adolescents in any structural combination of grades five through nine. Principals of all middle level schools in the United States were invited to participate in this study, which involved the collection of survey data by means of the Internet. Over 1,400 principals completed the on-line questionnaire during the 2000 spring and summer months.

To ensure data integrity, a post-study data analysis was conducted on grade organizational patterns, community type, and gender. Also included was an analysis of respondents, non-respondents, and comparison of responses from the first 100 and last 100 completed returns (Valentine & Lucas, 2001). An examination of the distributions of grade organizational patterns of respondents showed no significant differences from the total population of 14,107 middle level schools. Analysis of community type disclosed

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i NASSP's first national study was of the *junior high school* principalship (Rock & Hemphill, 1966) is referenced in this paper where comparison data are available.

a slight under-representation of urban schools in the sample and over-representation of rural schools. Gender response rates differed in the sample, with 75% of the returns completed by males and 25% by females. Although the gender distribution of the entire population of middle level principals could not be determined, approximately 65% of K-12 principals in the United States are males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Post-study data analysis suggested that males were over-represented in this sample.

General School Characteristics

Over the past three decades, the campaign to develop schools designed to meet the unique needs of early adolescents has made great strides. Paul S. George told middle grades educators in 1999 that the "…middle school movement is … the most successful grass roots movement in American educational history " (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 1). The following data demonstrate how middle level schools have changed since 1980, and develop a snapshot of the defining elements of the educational context of middle level schools in the year 2000.

Grade level configuration: The dominant grade level configurations reported in this study were grades 5-8, 6-8, 7 & 8, and 7-9. In 2000, 59% of the schools in the study were identified as serving students in grades 6-7-8, compared to 50% in 1992, 15% in 1980, and 5% in 1965. Middle schools that serve students in grades 6-7-8 have represented the prominent grade level configuration since 1992. The once dominant configuration serving grades 7-8-9 represented 6% of the middle level schools in 2000, dropping from 42% in 1980 and 67% in 1965. Schools with students in grades 7 and 8 comprise 17% of the respondent schools compared to 31% in 1980 . Another 10% of the schools serve students in grades 5-6-7-8, compared to 4% in 1980.

Enrollment: Despite a clear preference in the literature for small schools, the data did not show any evidence that large schools were becoming extinct. Thirteen percent (13%) of the schools had enrollment of more than 1000 students, compared to 16% in 1992 and 13% in 1980. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the schools reported enrollment of 600-999, compared to 35% in 1992 and 42% in 1980. In 2000, schools

with less than 600 students continue to represent the largest element of middle level schools: 51% in 2000, 49% in 1992, and 45% in 1980.

Classroom teacher to student ratio: Similar to data reported in 1992 and 1980, the most frequent class size ratio was one teacher to 21-25 students. There was a reported decrease in large classes (32% with one teacher to 31 or more students, compared to 39% in 1992 and 36% in 1980), and a corresponding increase in the percent of schools noting smaller class size ratios (27% with one teacher to 11-20 students, compared to 19% in 1992 and 19% in 1980). Although a desirable trend toward smaller classes is evident, it is still the case that approximately one third of the students in middle schools are still in very large classes, where it may be difficult for "teachers (to) have the opportunity to know (them) well enough to understand them and treat them as individuals" (CCAD, 1989, p. 37).

Student Attendance: In the past three decades, some middle level schools appear to have made significant progress in improved student attendance. Principals in 94% of the schools reported average daily attendance (ADA) of 90% or greater, compared to 90% in 1992 and 79% in 1980. Significant differences and a negative correlation are evident, however, when the data are disaggregated according to the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL). Schools with a high incidence of FRL have much lower attendance rates than do schools with a low incidence of FRL. For example, 62% of schools with 0-10% FRL report 96% or higher attendance, compared to 14% of the schools with 91-100% FRL. Although many middle level schools have achieved excellence in student attendance, it is evident that the challenge still exists for schools of poverty.

Violence: The tragic incidents of violence in some schools in the late 1990's were not evident in most middle level schools in this study. In fact, the number of violent acts toward students and/or adults appeared to have stabilized or decreased. Due to the fact that data on school violence had not been collected in either the 1980 or the 1992 study, respondents were asked their *perceptions of* changes in school violence in the past ten years. Thirty-five percent (35%) said violence toward adults had decreased, 49% stated it had remained about the same, and 16% noted an increase. Similar observations were

reported regarding student-to-student violence. It was corroborated that within the last five years, 95% of the schools had undertaken one or more measures to reduce violence. The most common measure was the development of a crisis management plan (86%). Other frequently implemented procedures were the establishment of closer relationships with law enforcement (83%), changes in disciplinary consequences (74%), introduction of conflict resolution (56%) or peer mediation (51%) programs, and enforcement of more stringent disciplinary regulations (51%). Although generally positive, the data cannot foster contentment: 16% of the middle level schools report increasingly violent situations and almost half of them have seen no improvement despite substantive efforts to reduce violence.

In summary, middle level leaders in the year 2000 are likely to be working in schools of less than 600 and which serve students in grades 6-7-8. They are likely to have somewhat smaller class sizes and be somewhat less subjected to violence than were their 1992 and 1980 correlates. Unless they work in schools of poverty, they are more likely to have higher attendance rates in their classes than in the past. Although an initial reaction would be that these are positive trends and conditions, there are also accompanying causes for concern, which are presented in the final section of this paper.

Personal Characteristics of the Principals

Consistent with the previous studies, and as might be expected, the majority of middle level principals are white males. The percent of female principals continues to increase, from 4% in 1965 and 6% in 1980, to 20% in 1992 and 27% in 2000. Large cities are distinguished in this regard: there are female principals in almost half (46%) of the schools in cities with populations between 150,000 - 999,999 as well as in 40% of the responding schools in cities with populations over a million. The percent of ethnic minority principals has remained relatively stable since 1980, with 5% African American, 2% Hispanic, and fewer than 1% identified as members of other ethnic backgrounds.

Principals in this study are older than their counterparts in 1992 and 1980; 50% were 50 years of age or older, compared to a range of 34% (1992) and 37% (1980) in the previous studies. The primary

gender differences occured with principals under the age of 40; 14% are males compared to 8% females.

Inconsistent with the data from the 1980 study, in 1992 and again in 2000 the largest group of principals was appointed to their first principalship between the ages of 35 and 45, where the largest group in the 1980 study was between 25 and 35. In 1980, only 10% of the principals were appointed at age 45 or older, compared to 14% in 1992 and 38% in 2000. Gender differences were also evident in the 2000 data: 42% of the females were appointed to their first principalship at age 45 or older, compared to 22% of the males.

Although principals in this study are older than in previous studies, they have considerably less experience in the principalship than in 1992 and 1980. Thirty percent (30%) of the principals in the 2000 study had one to three years experience, compared to 19% in 1992 and 22% in 1980.. Only 34% of the principals in 2000 had 10 or more years of experience, compared to 44% (1992) and 47% (1980) in previous studies. The percent of principals with 4-9 years of experience remained relatively stable: 36% (2000), 33% (1992), and 34% (1980).

The data regarding years as a middle level principal present a profile of even less experience. Only 23% of the respondents claim 10 or more years experience as a middle level principal, 38% had 1-3 years experience, and 38% showed 4-9 years.

Experiences and Professional Preparation

Principals in the study reported considerable background as teachers, counselors, or other non-administrator positions prior to the principalship: the largest group (46%) reported 10-19 years of such experience and 13% indicated 20 or more years. Fewer than one percent reported no non-administrative experience. The majority (58%) of principals served as an assistant principal for one to six years; however, 23% never served in such a capacity.

Although it is evident that most principals brought considerable expertise from non-administrative and administrative positions to their position as school leaders, not all this experience is specific to the

middle level. Forty-six percent had served for one to six years as a middle level assistant principal, however, 45% had never served in that capacity. Twenty percent of the respondents had no non-administrative experience at the middle level prior to becoming a principal; 53% indicated they had one to nine years and 24% had 10 or more years experience at the middle level.

When principals were asked how much value their developmental experiences had for them as principals, 85% stated that their work as an assistant principal was of great value. Work as a teacher had great value for 76%, and 53% indicated the same for work as a member of a leadership team.

When asked to identify the position of the person most influential during their first year as a principal, 44% of respondents indicated it was another principal, and 22% said it was a central office administrator. It is of great concern, however, that 10% of the principals indicated that no one had been influential during their first year, suggesting that they were isolated in the position and either chose to turn to no specific individual for assistance or had no such individual to whom to turn.

Academic Preparation

The breakdown of undergraduate majors of middle level principals has remained fairly constant over the last 20 years. Social Sciences (21%), Elementary Education (17%), Physical Education (14%), and Humanities (10%) were the top four undergraduate majors. Secondary education majors constituted 8% of the respondents, which was a slight increase from 1992 (5%) but a decrease from 1980 (11%). None of the principals indicated a major in middle level education as an undergraduate.

Almost two-thirds of the principals (62%) had a master's degree in Educational Administration and Supervision, 6% held a master's degree in Middle Level Education, and 33% held a master's degree in elementary, secondary, or other educational fields. Forty-one percent had an educational specialist's degree or had taken post-master's coursework, and 12% held a doctorate. The percent of principals with an educational specialist degree or a doctorate has remained relatively stable since 1992; 17% held an educational specialist degree in 2000, compared to 16% in 1992, and 11% held a doctorate in 2000 as well

as 1992.

When asked how many classes had been taken that explicitly focused on middle level education, the largest number of principals responded that they had not taken any such courses (37%), followed closely by 34% who had taken one or two, and 20% who had taken three to five courses. Although the percent of principals with undergraduate degrees in middle level education has remained between 0-1% since 1992, a promising trend emerges when graduate degrees are examined. The number of principals with advanced degrees in Middle Level Education has increased from less than 1% in 1992 to 11% in 2000.

The administrative licensure of responding principals shows a similar tendency; most do not hold administrative licensure specific to the middle level principalship. The largest group, 46%, holds K-12 licensure. The next largest group holds secondary licensure (39%), followed by 7% elementary and 8% middle level licensure. A disturbing trend is evidenced by the decline in the percent of principals holding middle level licensure since the 1992 study (16%). The percent of principals with secondary licensure also has declined (1992: 56%; 1980: 65%), while the percent of principals with elementary licensure has remained relatively stable during that time (1992: 8%; 1980:7%).

In contrast to the developmental value principals attributed to their experiences as assistant principals or teachers, 52% indicated that their university coursework was of moderate or little value, and 55% said the same for university field experiences. When asked specifically what elements of typical university programs were critical for principal preparation, the following topics received average ratings of between "very useful" (3) or "essential" (4) (Table I):

Table I

Principal Recommendations for the Preparation of Middle Level Principals

	Score Scale of 1-4	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Very Useful	Essential
Staff Supervision/Evaluation	3.5	<1%	8%	31%	60%
Interpersonal Skills/Relationships	3.5	<1	9	32	58
Instructional Leadership	3.4	<1	10	40	49
Oral/Written Communication Skills	3.4	<1	11	40	48
Collaborative Decision-Making	3.3	1	13	42	44
Legal Issues	3.3	0	15	40	45
Technology	3.3	<1	15	43	41
Program Evaluation, Assessment, and Accountability	3.3	<1	16	46	37
Curriculum Development	3.3	<1	22	35	42
Special Education/IDEA	3.2	<1	15	44	40
Middle Level Best Practices	3.2	1	16	46	37
Scheduling	3.2	3	16	44	37
Organizational Development/Change Process	3.2	2	18	39	41
Internship/Field Experiences	3.0	1	28	36	35

Average of: 1 = Not Useful, 2 = Somewhat Useful, 3 = Very Useful, 4 = Essential

Professional Development

When "principals improve their performance, the effects on a school's culture, structure, and instructional programs are multiplied many times over . . ." (Norton, 2000, p. 3). The principals responding to the 2000 survey appear to have been actively striving to enhance their professional skills and knowledge base while employed as principals. A higher percentage of principals were voluntarily participating in a

variety of professional development activities than in 1992; activities cited include participation in state professional organizations, conferences and/or institutes of national professional organizations, or programs of state department or regional educational agencies.

In contrast, membership in national administrators' associations declined over the past decade. Membership in the National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, while remaining significantly higher than other professional organizations, was down 10%. Membership in honorary associations was down 13%. The only professional association membership category that increased was in general professional associations for middle level education, such as the National Middle School Association, which showed a small increase of 3% since the 1992 study.

The majority of principals reported high levels of school district support for participation in professional development and professional organizations, with support levels similar to or slightly higher than those of 1992. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the principals reported that their district encouraged active participation in professional organizations. A majority of principals also indicated that their district paid membership dues (61%), allowed released time to attend meetings/conferences (79%), and paid all or most expenses to attend meetings and conferences (60%).

The Nature of Their Work

The profile of middle school leaders would not be complete without a description of the nature of the positions they hold. That the principalship is unequivocally demanding is axiomatic, but the trends and changing nature of the position and its challenges as identified in this study warrant attention.

One area of the work environment that has not changed significantly since 1992 are the perceptions of principals regarding the "roadblocks to success," that is, the factors that prevent them from doing the kind of job they would like to do. Ten roadblocks were identified by at least two-thirds of the

principals in both 2000 and 1992, all but one [ii] were identified by higher percentages of principals in 2000 than in 1992. The top ten "roadblocks" identified by survey respondents are represented in Table II.

Table II
Roadblocks that Prevent Principals from Doing the Kind of Job they Would Like to Do

	2000 "Moderate + Serious factor"	1992 "Moderate + Serious factor"
1. Time required by administrative detail at the expense of more important matters.	89%	85%
2. Lack of time for myself	82%	80%
2. Regulations/mandates from state/district governing boards	82%	79%
4. Parents apathetic or irresponsible about their children	80%	71%
4. Inability to obtain funding	80%	87%
6. Resistance to change	78%	66%
7. Problem students - apathetic, hostile, etc.	77%	64%
7. Insufficient space and physical facilities	77%	66%
9. Inability to provide teacher time for planning and professional development	75%	74%
10. Variations in the ability and dedication of staff	73%	71%

The average work week for the middle level principal has increased dramatically since 1965. Forty-six percent (46%) of the year 2000 respondents are working 50-59 or more hours a week (compared to 52% in 1992, 55% in 1980, and 47% in 1965) and only six percent (6%) are working less than 50 hours a week (compared to 12% in 1992, 31% in 1980, and 41% in 1965). The percent of principals who categorize their average work week as "60 or more hours per week" is 46%, compared to 36% in 1992, 17% in 1980, and 12% in 1965.

When asked how they spend their time and how they should spend their time, principals indicated they spend the most time on school management, personnel, student activities, and student behavior. When asked what they felt they *should* spend their time on, principals identified program development, personnel, planning, and school management. This incongruence between the ways that principals actually spend time and the ways they believe they should spend time has been fairly consistent over the past 20

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ii The roadblock "Inability to obtain funding" was identified as a moderate or serious factor by 80% of the principals

years (Table III).

Table III
Principals' Rank Order of Time Allocation for a Typical Work Week

	2000		1992		1980	
	Do Spend	Should Spend	Do Spend	Should Spend	Do Spend	Should Spend
School Management	1	4	1	3	1	3
Personnel	2	2	2	2	2	2
Student Activities	3	6	5	4	5	4
Student Behavior	4	8	3	8	3	8
Program Development	5	1	4	1	4	1
Planning	6	3	8	5	8	5
District Office	7	9	6	9	6	9
Community	8	7	7	5	7	6
Professional Development	9	5	9	7	9	7

Job Security and Satisfaction

The job of a middle level principal is characterized as being more rigorous and less secure than ever before. A decreasing number of individuals have tenure as a principal (20% in 2000 compared to 45% in 1965) and 12% of the respondents' salaries were linked to some sort of school performance. Nevertheless, consistent with previous studies, a large majority of respondents (82%) stated they would "definitely" or "probably" choose the job again, compared to 81% (1992) and 68% in 1980. In contrast, while only 7% of the principals in both the 2000 and the 1992 studies said they would "definitely or probably NOT" chose the job again, this was the choice of 17% of the 1980 respondents and 12% of those in 1965.

Principals in this study clearly reflected the leadership quality "…of a bedrock belief that what they were doing was good and important and eminently worthwhile" (Goldberg, 2001, p.758), and

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in 2000 and 87% in 1992.

although most would choose the position again, only 38% indicated that they intended to remain in their current position for the next three to five years (Table III). Thirty-six percent intended to seek another position in K-12 administration such as another middle school principalship (6%), a high school principalship (5%), a superintendency (10%), or a central office position other than superintendent (15%). Another 24% planned to retire. The fact is that within the next three to five years over half of the current middle level principals have plans to leave their current position, either to retire or to pursue other employment. This significant projected loss of middle level leadership has major implications for the future of middle level education.

Table III

Middle Level Principals' Career Plans for the Next Three to Five Years

	2000	1992	1980	1965
Remain in Current Position	38	50	37	51
Retirement	18	14	*	*
Seek a Central Office Position other than Superintendent	15	15	*	*
Seek a Position as a Superintendent	10	6	26	16
Seek a Different Principalship at the Middle Level	6	2	1	*
Seek a Principalship at the High School Level	5	3	7	9
Retire - Continue in Educational Leadership in another Retirement System	4	*	*	*
Retire - Seek a Position in Higher Education	2	*	*	*

*data not collected

Implications and Recommendations for the Future

As the 21st century begins, school leaders occupy a role characterized by complex and often contradictory demands. The "political, social, economic and demographic changes are introducing unparalleled opportunity, unexpected crises, and seemingly untractable problems" for those leaders (Murphy & Beck, 1994, p. 3). The snapshot of the middle level leadership portrayed in this study suggests

that most of these leaders have the traditional experience required of the position, are well prepared academically, and many bring a wealth of experience from the classroom and other non-administrative positions. More have graduate degrees in middle level education than ever before and most are highly likely to voluntarily engage in professional development. They do not recoil from the increased challenges and accountability of the job, and they are willing to work long hours to accomplish its tasks. They are dedicated professionals who would choose the principalship again, despite its demands.

However, the study raises several serious areas of concern. The passion for middle level schools and the burning desire to create developmentally responsive schools emphasized by Clark and Clark (2000, 1992) may not be an entry level characteristic of many middle level principals. The "…conscious choice to work with early adolescents", called for in *This We Believe and Now We Must Act* (Erb, 2001, p.11), may not be reality. A considerable number of principals have had little or no middle level experience prior to accepting a middle level principalship. Most have had no experience as a middle level assistant principal. The majority does not have licensure specific to the middle level leadership. Their academic preparation did not specifically address the unique developmental and cognitive needs of early adolescents. In addition, the study shows that job demands are increasing, the average number of hours worked in a week is increasing, and there is heightened accountability. The roadblocks to success have not diminished over the past 10 years, and some have increased. There is evidence that more than half of these principals plan to leave the middle level principalship within the next three to five years.

The results of this study present a compelling mandate for school systems, superintendents, and colleges and universities. Over one half of the current middle level principals do not plan to remain in their current position for more than a few years. Without enhanced recruitment initiatives, high quality administrator preparation programs, on-the-job training programs, and professional development for current and future middle level principals, it may be impossible to fill their shoes with highly qualified individuals. Expanding the vision of middle level education and creating developmentally responsive middle level schools "…is dependent on educators who are not only knowledgeable of the past but who are

conversant with successful practice, who understand what middle level schools can be, and who know why middle level schools must be restructured" (Clark & Clark, 1994, p. 29). This study provides evidence that there is much work yet to be done. Specifically, the following recommendations emerge from analysis and discussion of the data.

- ***Professional Development:*** School districts need to maintain their commitment to on-going professional development activities and support the active participation of recently appointed principals. This can be accomplished through substantive professional growth plans that focus on the unique aspects of middle level programs and practices. It cannot be assumed that current or future middle level principals are expert in their knowledge of the early adolescent. Those currently in leadership positions must continue to gain knowledge and further develop skills that prepare them to confront and conquer the real and daunting constraints of middle school reform. In addition, they must be prepared to be effective role models and mentors for the next generation of middle level leaders. Their abilities to anticipate the opportunities, meet the challenges, and create victories in school improvement as well as to inspire the next generation of leaders to do the same will be key to the success of the future of middle level education.

- ***Recruitment:*** The next generation of middle level principals needs to be actively recruited. Careful attention must be paid to the continued recruitment of women and minorities. "Grow Your Own" programs (Stricherz, 2001), "Aspiring Principals Workshops" (Petzko & Scearcy, 2001), or assessment centers such as those designed by NASSP and NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals) are a few of the various formats which could be used to identify potential leaders. There is ample opportunity for school districts to collaborate with universities and professional organizations in this effort. What cannot be denied is the imminent danger middle level schools face if individuals with the passion, the commitment, and the energy to be future middle level

leaders are not promptly identified and recruited.

- ***University Preparation Programs:*** Universities need to review the design and content of their principal preparation programs, field experiences and coursework. Consistent with other studies that describe internships as the weakest component of administrative preparation (Schneider, 2001), principals in this study did not rate their field experience as being "essential" to their professional development. Graduate programs would be well advised to examine the reasons behind this assessment, and to incorporate the associated recommendations into current programs. University faculty must examine how they currently address these issues in coursework and field experiences, and strive to increase their relevance and value for future middle level leaders.

- ***Assistant Principal Positions:*** A substantial majority of respondents named the assistant principalship as a highly valuable experience in their development. The assistant principal position should be increasingly utilized as a comprehensive training platform for future principal, as opposed to the traditional position primarily responsible for handling discipline and attendance and with only minor responsibility in other critical areas. School district personnel who are sincere about shaping the preparation of leaders must ensure that middle level assistant principalship positions provide extensive professional development for aspiring principals.

- ***Mentors:*** New principals should be provided with trained mentors for the first several years of their principalship. Bolman and Deal (1993) identify mentoring as a rich and continuing part of a principal's professional life. Zellner, Skrla, and Erlandson (2001) call mentoring a very powerful tool that is "...well suited for transmitting the complex knowledge and 'artistic skills' that are required for today's principals to become successful in today's demanding educational environments" (p. 5). In this study, 66% of the respondents identified another principal or central office administrator as influential

during their first year. Another 10% said no one filled that role. It is essential that all new principals have a trained mentor in the early stages of their careers. Mentoring relationships that are based on the professional growth of both individuals, characterized by high levels of trust and respect, and designed to prepare new or aspiring principals to become effective middle level leaders are essential elements of the development of future middle level schools.

In *Turning Points 2000,* Jackson and Davis (2000) assert that "no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students' performance than the school principal" (p. 157). They summarize the research by stating, "one of the most consistent findings in educational research is that high-achieving schools have strong, competent leaders" (p. 156). The middle school principal is at the heart of every school. His/her knowledge, insight, commitment, and leadership will determine to a great extent how well equipped the school is to address its challenges and how poised it is to seize its opportunities. The results of this study demonstrate that while the field is rich in many of these aspects, there are important areas that need to be addressed for continued growth and school reform. It is not the responsibility of any one agency, but rather the joint responsibility of the personnel in school systems, institutions of higher education, and professional organizations. Although a great deal of progress has been made in middle level concepts and reform, there is much that remains to be accomplished.

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